

History of the American Basketball Association (1967-1976)

On February 2, 1967, the American Basketball Association was born. The rival National Basketball Association had been looking for a competitor since the old American Basketball League (original) was out of business in 1963. At that time, the NBA had just 10 teams.

The new ABA consisted of 11 franchises, and four of them are still playing today. The 11 ABA teams that began play in the forthcoming 1967-68 season were as follows: Anaheim Amigos, Dallas Chaparrals, Denver Rockets (there already was a new NBA team in San Diego which took the same nickname Rockets, who now play in Houston), Houston Mavericks, Indiana Pacers, Kentucky Colonels, Minnesota Muskies, New Jersey Americans, New Orleans Buccaneers, Oakland Oaks, and the Pittsburgh Pipers, who would become the first ABA champions.

George Mikan, who played for the Minneapolis Lakers in the 1940's and 50's, became the first ABA commissioner. Unfortunately for Mikan, it would be a rather difficult first season for him, and for the new ABA. All 11 franchises, as expected, would lose money, and the attendance in most places would be rather embarrassing. (There once was a game in Houston where only 89 people attended the game--the smallest crowd by far in ABA history!)

The arenas where those 11 teams played in were not exactly the best the new league had to offer, but these where they all played:

Anaheim Amigos--Anaheim Convention Center (they also played some home games in Hawaii)

Dallas Chaparrals--Moody Coliseum (located on the campus of Southern Methodist University)

Denver Rockets--Denver Municipal Auditorium, and also Denver Arena

Houston Mavericks--Sam Houston Coliseum (that same season, a record crowd of over 52,000 saw the University of Houston--with Elvin Hayes--upset UCLA, which had a 47-game winning streak and who had Lew Alcindor before he became Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, 71-69)

Indiana Pacers--Fairgrounds Coliseum (the Pacers would win three ABA championships while playing there)

Kentucky Colonels--Freedom Hall (where the Colonels would play for all nine seasons of their existence--the only ABA team which would make this claim)

Minnesota Muskies--Metropolitan Sports Centre (also home of the NHL Minnesota North Stars until they moved to Dallas in 1993)

New Jersey Americans--Teaneck Armory (the Americans were supposed to host a playoff game with Kentucky, but the arena was not available; then they tried to play at an arena in Commack, N. Y., but the playing floor was too hazardous, and Kentucky won the game by forfeit)

New Orleans Buccaneers--Loyola Field House (where the New Orleans Jazz--now Utah Jazz--would play in 1975; the Buccaneers also played at the New Orleans Municipal Auditorium, which also was where the Jazz played in the 1974-75 season)

Oakland Oaks--Oakland Coliseum (indoor arena--not to be confused with the adjacent outdoor stadium where both the A's and Raiders now play; the Golden State Warriors now play there--known currently as The Arena in Oakland)

Pittsburgh Pipers--Civic Arena (the only indoor arena whose roof is retractable, meaning it can both open and close; known currently as Mellon Arena)

The eight teams who made the ABA playoffs that first season were Dallas, Denver, Houston, Indiana, Kentucky (who beat New Jersey by default when their schedule one-game playoff with the Americans was cancelled due to an unsafe playing court), Minnesota,

History of the American Basketball Association (1967-1976--continued)

New Orleans, and Pittsburgh.

The Pipers then played the Buccaneers for the ABA championship; in fact, it would be the only time ever the two franchises would meet in the finals. Pittsburgh, led by Connie Hawkins, the ABA's first Most Valuable Player (MVP) award winner, defeated New Orleans four games to three.

Mal Daniels of Minnesota won the league's first Rookie-of-the-Year award, but his team was one of four franchises who would soon be moving elsewhere. In fact, Daniels himself would be traded to the Indiana Pacers before the 1968-69 season would begin.

The Muskies moved their franchise to Miami to become the Floridians; the Anaheim Amigos, despite remaining in Southern California, still moved to Los Angeles where they became the Stars; the New Jersey Americans moved to Commack, Long Island and became the New York Nets; and finally, the Pittsburgh Pipers, who just won the ABA title, went to Minnesota because the league office, which was located in Minneapolis, preferred to have a local team.

When the 1968-69 ABA season started, a new star was emerging, but he would only appear for half of the season. Rick Barry joined the Oakland Oaks, whom he actually joined the season before, but he was ordered to sit out the first season due to court restrictions. The Oaks would win a franchise and then-ABA record 60 games with Barry, but a knee injury against the Nets sidelined him for the season.

Barry, ironically enough, held on to his league-leading 34.0 scoring average for the entire regular season!

These were the arenas where they played their home games regularly for 1968-69:

Dallas Chaparrals--Moody Coliseum

Denver Rockets--Denver Municipal Auditorium

Houston Mavericks--Sam Houston Coliseum (just one year after the UCLA-Houston college basketball game drew over 52,000 in the nearby Astrodome, the Mavericks drew less than 50,000 for the entire season! Only 89 people attended their last home game before the team mercifully moved to North Carolina--the team already agreed to move there during the season!)

Indiana Pacers--Fairgrounds Coliseum

Kentucky Colonels--Freedom Hall (during that season, a female jockey named Penny Ann Early appeared in a game for Kentucky; she was the only woman, until the Women's National Basketball Association [WNBA] was born in 1997, ever to appear in an ABA regular season game!)

Los Angeles Stars--Los Angeles Sports Arena (where the NBA's Los Angeles Lakers played from 1960 to 1967, and until 1999 was home of the Los Angeles Clippers)

Miami Floridians--Dinner Key Auditorium (an airplane hangar; it was the only noted arena where it was so hot, the doors often needed to be open to pick up fresh air from outdoors! Later, the team would be more remembered for its ball girls!)

Minnesota Pipers--Metropolitan Sports Centre (which only one year earlier was home of the Muskies; the North Stars would play there for the next 25 years until the team moved to Dallas after the 1992-93 season)

New York Nets--Commack Arena (compared to Miami's Dinner Key Auditorium, it was by far the coldest arena ever to hold any basketball games there! It was the same arena where the Nets, then the Americans, were supposed to host the

History of the American Basketball Association (1967-1976--continued)

playoff game with Kentucky before declaring it a forfeit due to poor conditions)

New Orleans Buccaneers--New Orleans Municipal Auditorium (the Louisiana Superdome wasn't even built yet; the Buccaneers would not stay in New Orleans in time to build the new stadium)

Oakland Oaks--Oakland Coliseum Arena

In the ABA playoffs, Oakland, which finished with the ABA's worst record in their first season without Rick Barry, surprised all of its competitors by winning the league championship, and again without Barry, who was sidelined by the knee injury. The Oaks eliminated Denver, New Orleans, and Indiana to capture what would become their only league title in franchise history.

However, just three months after winning the ABA championship, the Oakland franchise was purchased by Earl Foreman, who promptly moved the team to Washington, D. C., where the Oaks became the Capitols.

Oakland, as it turned out, was not the only franchise that would be moving in 1969. The aforementioned Houston Mavericks, after drawing barely over 120,000 in their two seasons of existence, moved to North Carolina, where they became the Carolina Cougars. The Minnesota Pipers returned to Pittsburgh when the ABA finally moved their league office to New York, and the Nets, although they actually did stay in Long Island, moved out of the Commack Arena and into Island Gardens, a 6,000-seat facility located in Hempstead, N. Y.

Best of all, even whom would run the ABA had made not one, but two changes, as George Mikan, who was the league's only commissioner to date, resigned. He was replaced first by James Gardner, then by a network TV sports executive named Jack Dolph. The league's office headquarters were transferred from Minneapolis to New York at about the same time the Pipers returned from Minnesota to Pittsburgh, and it would be 20 years before another pro basketball team would come to Minnesota.

The renamed Washington Capitols, who won the ABA title as the Oakland Oaks the year before, would defend their championship in 1969-70, but Rick Barry, who was back with the team after a knee injury, suddenly wanted out. In fact, Barry actually had signed a contract to play for the NBA San Francisco (now Golden State) Warriors, but the court told him that he had to continue playing in the ABA. The Capitols made the playoffs that season, but the story of the year was in Denver.

No, it wasn't about the pro football Denver Broncos, who would not even play in a Super Bowl until 1978 and then finally win one well into the 1990's. The Denver Rockets had a new talented player in Spencer Haywood, who at 20, already gained fame in the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico, where he was a member of the undefeated U. S. men's basketball team. With Denver, Haywood showed that he, supposedly was ready to become a legend in the junior league, and in his first year, the Rockets won the Western Division with a 51-31 record. An ABA championship seemed to be knocking on the door for Denver, but they were eliminated by the Los Angeles Stars in the playoffs.

These were the arenas used by the ABA teams during 1969-70:

Carolina Cougars--Greensboro Coliseum

Charlotte Coliseum (this is not where the NBA's Charlotte Hornets would play when they were born in 1988)

Dallas Chaparrals--Moody Coliseum

Denver Rockets--Denver Municipal Auditorium

Indiana Pacers--Fairgrounds Coliseum

Kentucky Colonels--Freedom Hall

Los Angeles Stars--Los Angeles Sports Arena (the Stars would play several playoff

History of the American Basketball Association (1967-1976--continued)

Los Angeles Stars (continued)--games in Anaheim, which had an ABA team there in 1967-68; it would be the last season for the Stars as a Los Angeles franchise, too, because most of their crowds were below 3,000; they would become the Utah Stars in 1970-71)

Miami Floridians--Dinner Key Auditorium

Miami Beach Convention Hall (after this season, all but two of their players would be gone, either to other teams or simply no longer play)

New York Nets--Island Gardens (the Nets would play there for two seasons before moving to the Nassau Coliseum in the early 1970's)

New Orleans Buccaneers--New Orleans Municipal Auditorium (it was to be their last season in New Orleans; they were also the only ABA team ever to finish with a record of .500 or better and, at the same time, end up in last place! The Bucs were 42-42 in the 1969-70 season before the franchise moved to Memphis, Tennessee.)

Pittsburgh Pipers--Pittsburgh Civic Arena (where the team would be playing until disbanding in 1972)

Washington Capitols--Washington Coliseum (it was their only season in the nation's capital before they moved to three different places in Virginia)

The ABA Finals saw the Indiana Pacers meet the Los Angeles Stars, and it was Indiana that won their first ABA title when the series ended. In fact, it also proved to be a double whammy for basketball in Los Angeles; not only did the Stars lose, but so did the NBA Lakers, who lost to the New York Knicks in seven games, despite having Wilt Chamberlain, Elgin Baylor, and Jerry West on the Lakers squad--the Knicks had Walt Frazier and Willis Reed, who was injured in that series and almost didn't play in the seventh game! When the ABA Finals, and the 1969-70 season ended, the Stars moved to Salt Lake City, Utah.

The 1970-71 season began with the rival NBA adding three new teams: the Buffalo Braves, the Cleveland Cavaliers, and the Portland Trail Blazers.

In the ABA, there were no new teams, of course, but there still were some franchise moves: the aforementioned Los Angeles Stars, despite playing in the ABA Finals the year before, became the Utah Stars following their off-season move to Salt Lake City; the New Orleans Buccaneers became the Memphis Pros; the Washington Capitols moved to Virginia where they became the Squires; the Dallas Chaparrals, though it would still be three more years before they too, would move, changed their name to the Texas Chaparrals; the Pittsburgh Pipers returned as the Pittsburgh Condors; and finally, the Miami Floridians had become the Floridians--a one-name team!

Gone, too, after just one season, was Denver's Spencer Haywood, who was unable to meet a contract agreement to continue playing for the Rockets. Haywood, who had won the ABA's Rookie-of-the-Year and Most Valuable Player awards in the same season--the only such man ever to do it in the ABA--went to the NBA's Seattle SuperSonics.

Meanwhile, the newly-named Virginia Squires finally were able to trade an unhappy Rick Barry to the New York Nets; Barry was born in nearby Elizabeth, N. J. Virginia, however, was fortunate to win their first--and only--Eastern Division championship with Larry Brown, Doug Moe, and Rookie-of-the-Year Charlie Scott; the Squires were 55-29 for the season.

The Utah Stars, in their first season playing at the new Salt Palace, had little trouble winning their first Western Division title thanks to veterans Zelmo Beaty, Willie Wise, and head coach Bill Sharman.

These were the arenas used by the ABA teams during 1970-71, at least from memory:

History of the American Basketball Association (1967-1976--continued)

Carolina Cougars--Greensboro Coliseum
Charlotte Coliseum

Denver Rockets--Denver Municipal Auditorium

Floridians--Miami Beach Convention Center
Curtis Hixon Hall, Tampa
(Also played home games in Jacksonville)

Indiana Pacers--Fairgrounds Coliseum

Kentucky Colonels--Freedom Hall

Memphis Pros--Mid-South Coliseum
(Also played home games in Mississippi, and in Jackson, Tennessee)

New York Nets--Island Gardens (it would be the Nets' last season playing there)

Pittsburgh Condors--Pittsburgh Civic Arena

Texas Chaparrals--Moody Coliseum
(Also played home games in Fort Worth and Lubbock)

Utah Stars--Salt Palace (the same arena that would later be used by the NBA's Utah Jazz from 1979 to 1994)

Virginia Squires--Norfolk Scope
Hampton Roads Coliseum
Richmond Coliseum (the Squires would use all three of those arenas until 1976)

Utah faced Kentucky, whose star player in 1970-71 was Dan Issel, a co-Rookie-of-the-Year winner (Issel shared the award with Charlie Scott of Virginia), in the fourth annual ABA championship series. The Stars won the series in seven games, giving Salt Lake City a league championship for the first and only time to date. (The Utah Jazz played in the NBA championship series against the Chicago Bulls in 1997 and 1998, but lost to Chicago and basketball great Michael Jordan both times.)

However, the Stars would begin the next year without head coach Bill Sharman, who went to the L. A. Lakers, and Sharman would coach the Lakers to an NBA title in 1972, which featured a record 33-game winning streak--their first championship in Los Angeles!

In the 1971-72 season, the ABA had brought in what many claimed to be the best player the league had ever seen: Julius Erving, a 6'6" rookie from Massachusetts who went to the Virginia Squires, but who would see better days ahead.

However, the Kentucky Colonels, desperate for an ABA title, drafted 7'2" Artis Gilmore from Jacksonville, and with Gilmore in the lineup, Kentucky won a league record 68 games--only one fewer than the NBA's Lakers!

Virginia, with rookie Julius Erving in the starting lineup, won 45 games and finished second in the Eastern Division, but it was 10 fewer than the year before. The Squires lost forward Charlie Scott just before the playoffs began, but it wasn't to any injury of sort. Scott was unhappy playing in Virginia suddenly, and he went to the NBA Phoenix Suns in March of 1972. He would be playing another three seasons in Phoenix before he was traded away again.

As for the rest of the ABA, there was something relatively new about it: it was the first time in ABA history that no franchises had moved, although the Texas Chaparrals' idea of playing games all over Texas did not really work, so they again became the Dallas Chaparrals. Sadly for both the Floridians and the Pittsburgh Condors, the 1971-72 season would be their last for both teams.

History of the American Basketball Association (1967-1976--continued)

Thus here are the arenas used during 1971-72 by the ABA teams as follows:

Carolina Cougars--Charlotte Coliseum
Greensboro Coliseum

Dallas Chaparrals--Moody Coliseum

Denver Rockets--Denver Municipal Auditorium

Floridians--Miami Beach Convention Center (for most of their games in what became their last ABA season)

Indiana Pacers--Fairgrounds Coliseum

Kentucky Colonels--Freedom Hall

Memphis Pros--Mid-South Coliseum

New York Nets--Nassau Coliseum (where the NHL's New York Islanders would be playing since 1972)

Pittsburgh Condors--Civic Arena (still in use by the hockey Pittsburgh Penguins)

Utah Stars--Salt Palace

Virginia Squires--Hampton Roads Coliseum
Norfolk Scope
Richmond Coliseum

Despite winning their record 68 games--they lost only 16 all season--Kentucky still did not even reach the ABA Finals as they did in 1970-71. The Colonels were eliminated by the New York Nets in the Eastern Division Finals, and the Nets proceeded to play Indiana in the 1972 ABA Finals, which was won by the Pacers. It was Indiana's second ABA title in their five years of existence, thanks in part to yet another future star player: George McGinnis, who played at Indiana University, and it also was the year before Bobby Knight became head coach of the Hoosiers, where he would remain for 29 years until he was finally let go by the school in September of 2000.

After the 1971-72 ABA season was over, however, the Pittsburgh and Florida clubs had, as expected, gone out of business, leaving the league with nine teams, but a tenth team was born in San Diego.

In 1972-73, the ABA's sixth season, there were yet more changes for the struggling basketball league: besides losing the aforementioned teams who had folded, and then adding another, there fortunately no franchise moves, but one team, the Memphis Pros, were purchased by Charles O. Finley, who already had owned baseball's Oakland Athletics, and the NHL's Oakland Seals. Finley renamed his new team the Memphis Tams.

And there also was a change in the commissioner's office, where after just three seasons Jack Dolph resigned, and he was replaced by Bob Carlson, who became the ABA's fourth commissioner already!

Gone too, was Rick Barry, who was finally allowed to play for the NBA's Golden State Warriors, but coming in from the rival league was another star player, Billy Cunningham, who joined the Carolina Cougars. Cunningham, a forward, had played his entire career for the Philadelphia 76ers, but when he left them, the 76ers promptly went on to finish with an embarrassing record of 9-73, still the worst record ever for a pro basketball team!

Cunningham did help the Cougars win their first--and only--division championship, and he was named the ABA's Most Valuable Player for 1972-73. But the Cougars still fell short of the ABA championship they would never accomplish as a franchise--they were eliminated by the Kentucky Colonels, who went to the ABA Finals.

History of the American Basketball Association (1967-1976--continued)

Here are the arenas used by the ABA in 1972-73:

Carolina Cougars--Charlotte Coliseum
Greensboro Coliseum

Dallas Chaparrals--Moody Coliseum (the last year Dallas would have a pro basketball team until 1980)

Denver Rockets--Denver Municipal Auditorium

Indiana Pacers--Fairgrounds Coliseum

Kentucky Colonels--Freedom Hall

Memphis Tams--Mid-South Coliseum

New York Nets--Nassau Coliseum

San Diego Conquistadors--Peterson Gym (the first of three different arenas to be used by the Conquistadors, or Q's as they often were called; there was no formal agreement to play in the 14,000-seat San Diego Sports Arena until the 1974-75 season!)

Utah Stars--Salt Palace

Virginia Squires--Hampton Roads Coliseum
Norfolk Scope
Richmond Coliseum

Without Rick Barry, the New York Nets were only 30-54 under head coach Lou Carnasecca, who was then fired after the Nets lost out in the playoffs to the Carolina Cougars. Carnasecca, who would be more famous as the head coach at St. John's University, was succeeded by Kevin Loughery, who already was the head coach of the Philadelphia 76ers, and in the fall of 1973, an even more famous player would join the team: Julius Erving.

The Indiana Pacers and Kentucky Colonels played in the ABA Finals, and it was the Pacers who won the series in seven games, taking the finale at Kentucky by a considerably low score of 88-81. It was the third title for Indiana in their six-year history, led by Billy Keller, Mel Daniels, Roger Brown, and the newest star of them all--at least outside of Julius Erving and Artis Gilmore--George McGinnis. Since then, however, Indiana hasn't won a league championship after claiming their third title in 1973. (The Pacers, in June of 2000, would finally reach their first NBA championship series ever, but would lose the series to the Los Angeles Lakers in six games.)

Of all the seasons in its nine-year history, none was more interesting than in 1973-74, which was the ABA's seventh year. Julius Erving played his first two seasons with the Virginia Squires, but owner Earl Foreman was losing money in Virginia, and in order to make money, he traded away Erving to the New York Nets, and gone, too, before the season was over were Swen Nater, and another 6'6" forward from Eastern Michigan named George Gervin. Both of them were traded to the San Antonio Spurs in mid-season; the Spurs were formally the Dallas Chaparrals who had moved to San Antonio prior to the 1973-74 season.

None of the other nine franchises had moved, but in San Diego, the Conquistadors left Peterson Gym for Golden Hall and, at the same time, signed 37-year-old Wilt Chamberlain, already the NBA's all-time leading scorer and rebounder (Chamberlain, until recently, was the NBA's second-leading scorer in history), to play for and coach the Q's.

Unfortunately, his former team, the Los Angeles Lakers, still had Chamberlain under contract, and a court ruling resulted in Chamberlain being restricted to a coach with San Diego. The 1973-74 season would be the 7'1" center's only season ever as a coach. (In 1979, Chamberlain was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame. Twenty years later in October of 1999, however, Wilt Chamberlain would die of a heart attack at the age of 63.)

History of the American Basketball Association (1967-1976--continued)

But in New York, the acquisition of Julius Erving from Virginia gave the Nets, who also had a new coach in Kevin Loughery--he was the coach of the Philadelphia 76ers that had gone 9-73--a division title that the franchise never before claimed. With another acquisition in Wendell Ladner from Kentucky, he joined John Williamson, Billy Paultz, and Erving to form one of the ABA's best. Erving would win the first of two scoring titles, and the first of three MVP awards--all with the Nets.

And finally, after six long seasons--and in their fourth home arena--the Nets would win the first ABA championship of two, defeating the Utah Stars in four straight games. It was the third time in the 1970's a New York basketball team had won a championship; the other two were captured by the NBA Knicks, who defeated the Lakers in both 1970 and 1973.

Before the 1973-74 season started, there was one other change of note: Mike Storen, only 34, replaced Bob Carlson as the league's fifth commissioner in seven years. Storen, whose daughter is Hannah Storm, a popular TV sportscaster who until recently worked for NBC after she also worked for cable TV station CNN, would only serve as ABA commissioner for one year, however. The next year, Storen would become general manager of the Memphis club.

The following are the arenas that were used by the league during 1973-74:

Carolina Cougars--Charlotte Coliseum

Greensboro Coliseum (it was the last year for pro basketball in North Carolina until the NBA's Charlotte Hornets were born in 1988. Also gone from the Carolina team were general manager Carl Scheer, head coach Larry Brown, forward Billy Cunningham--himself a future coach in the rival NBA--and most of the other members of the 1973-74 Cougars, who would become the Spirits of St. Louis in 1974-75)

Denver Rockets--Denver Municipal Auditorium (it was Denver's last season as the Rockets; they became the Nuggets for the 1974-75 season in case of a forthcoming merger with the NBA)

Indiana Pacers--Fairgrounds Coliseum (the Pacers' last year in this arena before moving to Market Square Arena in 1974)

Kentucky Colonels--Freedom Hall

Memphis Tams--Mid-South Coliseum (it was Memphis's last year as the Tams, before changing their name to the Sounds. In fact, Charles O. Finley, owner of the Tams, had already sold the franchise back to the league in mid-season!)

New York Nets--Nassau Coliseum

San Antonio Spurs--HemisFair Arena (its original seating capacity was barely more than 10,000, but in 1977, after the Spurs would join the NBA in 1976, the number of seats would be increased to over 16,000)

San Diego Conquistadors--Golden Hall (a 3,2000-seat facility used by San Diego, which still could not lease the Sports Arena for another year)

Utah Stars--Salt Palace

Virginia Squires--Hampton Roads Coliseum
Norfolk Scope
Richmond Coliseum

After the 1973-74 season ended, there were yet more changes: the Carolina Cougars were history as they moved to St. Louis and became known as the Spirits of St. Louis, a rare sports franchise with the formality of team nickname before city or region. (Only hockey's "Mighty Ducks of Anaheim" has a current similar official team identity.) And in New York, the ABA changed commissioners again, with Tedd Munchak taking over for Mike Storen; Munchak was the sixth commissioner to hold office, but there would be one more to follow!

History of the American Basketball Association (1967-1976 continued)

While Carolina's franchise went to St. Louis, the Memphis Tams, after Charles O. Finley had sold the franchise, were purchased by the same Mike Storen who had just left the commissioner's chair, and he changed their name to the Memphis Sounds.

The other team to make an alteration was the Denver Rockets, who became the Denver Nuggets when Carl Scheer came in from the former Carolina Cougars as the Nuggets' new general manager. Scheer then proceeded to rehire Larry Brown as Denver's new head coach.

And the Nuggets, new coach, nickname and all, became a success: the previous year, as the Rockets, they lost to San Diego in a one-game playoff. The 1974-75 Nuggets would finish at 65-19, winning an ABA record 40 games at home!

On the opposite side, however, was the San Diego Conquistadors, who lost Wilt Chamberlain to retirement after just one year as the Q's head coach; San Diego would finish last with a record of 31-51, and despite finally playing in the Sports Arena, the home attendance still was not enough to keep the franchise going for much longer. The Q's best player that season, Caldwell Jones, in fact, had already signed a contract agreement to play for the NBA's Philadelphia 76ers beginning with the 1977-78 season. As it all turned out, Jones already was playing for Philadelphia in 1976, and one of his teammates that season would be Julius Erving, and another was George McGinnis!

Two other franchises whose future also was in doubt were Memphis and Virginia. The Sounds finished in fourth place in the East at 27-57, but because Virginia went 15-69, the worst record ever for any ABA team in any season, it put Memphis in the playoffs, where they would lose to Kentucky in five games.

Sadly, as it turned out, it was to be the franchise's last game in which it formally counted. The Squires would return, but only for one more season, also as time would pass by.

The league's four best teams, in addition to Denver, were Kentucky, the New York Nets, and Indiana. The Nuggets were successful with such players as Ralph Simpson, Mack Calvin and Jan Van Breda Kolff; the Nets still had Julius Erving, Billy Paultz, and Wendell Ladner; Indiana had not only George McGinnis, but also rookie Billy Knight; and Kentucky still had Dan Issel, Louie Dampier, and Artis Gilmore. Erving and McGinnis would wind up as the ABA's co-MVP winners for 1974-75.

The Nets and Colonels, playing in the same division, also were at season's end co-division champions with identical 58-26 records, so a one-game playoff was necessary. Kentucky, playing at home, beat New York 108-99 for the division title. In February during a game at San Diego, Erving scored 63 points, which was more than any ABA player in the 1974-75 season, but the Nets lost that game in four overtimes to the Conquistadors, 176-166!

It would get worse for the Nets in the playoffs, too. While Kentucky had little trouble with Memphis, New York lost to St. Louis, a team whose most famous player was rookie Marvin Barnes, in five games. The Nets had beaten the Spirits all 11 times playing each other during the 1974-75 season, but it was the Spirits who advanced to the semi-finals; they finally lost to Kentucky in five games, too.

Denver, after finishing 65-19, beat Utah, which made news during the off-season by signing 19-year-old Moses Malone, a high school player, to a five-year contract over \$2 million to play for the Stars. Unfortunately for Malone, the Utah franchise would also not live long enough, either. But the Nuggets were unable to get by the Indiana Pacers in the semi-finals, and thus would begin a new tradition by being eliminated by one playoff team or another, even as they would soon join the NBA. (When Denver did join the NBA, the Nuggets would make the playoffs in each of their first three seasons, but would lose to Portland in 1977, Seattle in 1978, and the L. A. Lakers in 1979.)

History of the American Basketball Association (1967-1976--continued)

Kentucky and Indiana played against each other for the league's championship, and the history showed that the Pacers won three of four ABA championships, but Kentucky lost in the finals in 1971 and 1973, once to Indiana. This time, however, the Colonels were fortunate to win the ABA title, as they defeated Indiana four games to one. Sadly, it would be the Colonels' only ABA championship in a history that would soon come to a close.

These were the arenas used by the ABA in 1974-75, the year before any serious plans about a merger with the NBA would begin:

Denver Nuggets--Denver Municipal Auditorium (the last season for the Rockets/Nuggets franchise in this arena)

Indiana Pacers--Market Square Arena

Kentucky Colonels--Freedom Hall

Memphis Sounds--Mid-South Coliseum (last season of the Memphis ABA franchise, at least in Memphis--the Sounds would be moving to Baltimore after the 1974-75 season, only to prematurely go out of business the following October, just before baseball's World Series was over)

New York Nets--Nassau Coliseum

San Antonio Spurs--HemisFair Arena

San Diego Conquistadors--San Diego Sports Arena (the Q's third and last home arena in franchise history)

Spirits of St. Louis--St. Louis Arena (which also was home of the St. Louis Blues NHL hockey team; this arena no longer is in existence--it would be demolished in 1998)

Utah Stars--Salt Palace (which would lose its ABA franchise a year after the signing of Moses Malone)

Virginia Squires--Hampton Roads Coliseum
Norfolk Scope
Richmond Coliseum

After Kentucky won its first and only-ever ABA championship, the league was preparing for the supposedly-ultimate 1975-76 season, where after it was over, America would be observing the Bicentennial. The ABA itself, however, was wondering if it would be able to survive the nation's 200th anniversary as the 10 teams began for their customary training camp, all in case everything would go right on schedule.

The Denver Nuggets signed two rookies to their already-successful team that came up short in the 1975 ABA playoffs: David Thompson and Marvin Webster, both of them drafted by established NBA teams. Thompson was drafted by the Atlanta Hawks, and also by the Virginia Squires. However, just a few weeks later, the Squires traded Thompson to Denver for Mack Calvin, Jan Van Breda Kolff, and Mike Green. The NBA's New York Knicks drafted Webster, but had chosen to play for Denver instead, too.

And not surprisingly, the league began its ninth and final season with a franchise move: the Memphis Sounds had moved to Baltimore to become the Claws (their original choice, the Baltimore Hustlers, had to be altered to the Claws nickname after numerous complaints), and Dave DeBusschere, the former New York Knicks basketball great, was the ABA's seventh commissioner, replacing Tedd Munchak. In 1974-75, after his retirement as a player, DeBusschere was the New York Nets' general manager; he already was head coach of the NBA's Detroit Pistons at the age of 24!

But in September of 1975, what the ABA had been fearing since the league's inception in 1967 had happened. The Nets and Nuggets, two of the ABA's nine charter members, applied for admission to the NBA as soon as there was a merger.

History of the American Basketball Association (1967-1976--continued)

Then, just one month later, the new Baltimore Claws, after playing three exhibition games (they lost all of them) and who they had acquired Dan Issel from Kentucky, only to trade him to Denver for Dave Robisch, had folded their franchise before the 1975-76 season began. The ABA now had only nine teams to open the season, but it was to be short-lived.

On November 11, 1975, the San Diego franchise, which had its name changed from Conquistadors to Sails, and whom had named Bill Musselman (now deceased) as their head coach, were 3-8 when they also had folded. It was now down to eight teams for the nine-year-old basketball league.

But that was not all; Utah, with Moses Malone, Ron Boone, and Maurice Lucas on the team, and who had won an ABA title in 1971, went bankrupt on December 2 after the Stars went 4-12 without Malone, who was injured at the time. Utah's departure left the ABA with only seven teams, at which the two divisions were combined into one.

When the three teams folded, the ABA set up a format where the top five teams made the playoffs, and the first-place team drew a bye, while the fourth- and fifth-place teams met; the winner would then meet the team which finished in first place during the season.

St. Louis, just one year after they upset New York, who tragically lost forward Wendell Ladner in June of 1975 when he died in an off-season plane crash, had talked of merging with the Utah franchise before the Stars went out of business, but that never happened.

The Virginia Squires almost folded their franchise, too, and their final season in the ABA was a disaster. The Squires fired Al Bianchi, who was their only coach in the Virginia portion of their history. Bianchi was replaced by Mack Calvin, Willie Wise, Bill Musselman, Jack Ankerson, and finally, Zelmo Beaty--six coaches in all! The Squires were fortunate enough to finish out the schedule, and their record was poor, going 15-68 before the team folded their franchise in May of 1976.

Denver, on the other hand, continued to be one of the ABA's strongest teams, going 60-24 with the addition of David Thompson, who had little trouble winning the ABA's last Rookie-of the Year award, and just fell short of winning the MVP award, which went to Julius Erving of the Nets for the third time! The Nuggets also played host to the final ABA All-Star Game, which had themselves against the ABA All-Stars. (Denver was chosen as the ABA All-Stars' opponent because the Nuggets were in first place on January 15, after the league made an earlier commitment in that whoever was ahead on that date would serve as the home team.)

Denver won the 1976 All-Star Game, 144-138, and Thompson was named the MVP of the game. And at halftime, Erving himself won the world's first-ever "Slam Dunk Contest" that is now popular in annual NBA All-Star games.

And so, in the ninth and final ABA season, before we proceed to who won the league's last championship, the arenas that were in use:

Baltimore Claws--Baltimore Civic Center (unfortunately, there never was an ABA game played there; the Claws had folded in October of 1975)

Denver Nuggets--McNichols Sports Arena (which would also host the NBA All-Star Game in 1984)

Indiana Pacers--Market Square Arena (which is no longer in use by the current Pacers team; Indiana was the only team that made the playoffs in every season in the ABA)

Kentucky Colonels--Freedom Hall (last season of existence for the Colonels; they also played selected home games in Cincinnati)

History of the American Basketball Association (1967-1976--continued)

New York Nets--Nassau Coliseum (it was Julius Erving's last year as a member of the Nets, however; he would be sold to Philadelphia in October of 1976. In 1977, the Nets would be moving out of the Nassau Coliseum and into a temporary home at New Jersey's Rutgers University, before finally moving to the present Meadowlands arena in 1981)

San Antonio Spurs--HemisFair Arena (where the Spurs would continue to play until the early 1990's)

San Diego Sails--San Diego Sports Arena (it would later be the home of the NBA's San Diego Clippers until they moved to Los Angeles in 1984; the Sails folded in November of 1975)

Spirits of St. Louis--St. Louis Arena (after the 1975-76 season was over, the Spirits announced already that the franchise was moving to Salt Lake City, where they would become the Utah Rockies; however, when the formal ABA-NBA merger was announced, the St. Louis/Utah franchise would be folding)

Utah Stars--Salt Palace (another ABA team was looking forward to be playing in Utah after the Stars folded--the Spirits of St. Louis; unfortunately, there would not be another pro basketball team there until the 1979-80 season)

Virginia Squires--Hampton Roads Coliseum

Norfolk Scope

Richmond Coliseum (it was the Squires' last ABA season; there has reportedly not been a pro basketball game there since 1976, when the Virginia franchise went bankrupt and folded)

In the final ABA championship series of its existence, though many did not know for sure that it was, the New York Nets defeated the Denver Nuggets in six games for the last ABA title. The Nets won the sixth game, 112-106, after trailing by 20 points in the second half. (Neither team would even make it to an NBA Finals since that last ABA Championship series!)

About the best thing to happen in the ABA during that 1975-76 season was the attendance. Denver drew over 500,000 fans in the regular season, which was more than several NBA teams, and they drew for the championship series three record crowds of over 19,000 fans which would, at one time, have needed as many as three games just to draw so many people! Attendance in Nassau Coliseum for the three games played there was an average of 15,000, which meant that over 100,000 fans watched the Nuggets and Nets play out the six-game series.

Then, finally, on June 17, 1976, the American Basketball Association was history. Four of the ABA's remaining six teams--the New York Nets (they would become the New Jersey Nets in 1977), Denver Nuggets, Indiana Pacers, and San Antonio Spurs, went to the NBA. The St. Louis/Utah, Kentucky and Virginia franchises, who did manage to finish out the 1975-76 season, were all gone. (Only Utah has since got its own NBA franchise, when in June of 1979, the New Orleans Jazz moved to Salt Lake City, and became the Utah Jazz.)

Julius Erving, by far the best player in the ABA's nine-year history, would not return to the Nets for the team's first NBA season; he went to the Philadelphia 76ers, and in 1983, led them to the NBA championship over the Los Angeles Lakers. Erving also played in the NBA finals in 1977, 1980, and 1982, but Philadelphia lost all three of those NBA Finals series--two of them to the Lakers and the other to Portland in 1977!

But, for the ABA, as a whole, it was a league to remember!